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The role of the media and communication in recovery from natural disasters: A case study of the Canberra 'firestorm' and its aftermath 2003-2007

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Abstract
The enormous tragedy of bushfires with significant loss of life, destruction of property, and differential recovery resulting in community division-that is, 'cleavage planes'-has become an all too common feature of the Australian experience. Research on the communication aspects of emergencies has tended to focus on preparedness and response with little in-depth analysis of the role of the media and communication strategies relating to the recovery process. In this paper, focusing on the Canberra 'firestorm' of 2003 and the aftermath recovery process, we report on a study seeking survivors' views on the functions of communication in the recovery process. The key points were that the media played a significant role in affecting the recovering community-both positively and negatively-in their recovery, that multiple sources of information were needed, that individuals experiencing post-disaster stress absorb information differently, and that the timeliness of the information to individuals was important. A very powerful message was that political and legal issues arising from the aftermath of the fire greatly affected people's recovery. The research demonstrates that it is important for the media to acquire a degree of sensitivity regarding the effect its reporting has on a seriously damaged community and provide an accurate portrayal without sensationalism. It also suggests that communities seek agency in their own recovery and that government involvement can assist or hinder this process.

Keywords
firestorm, natural, study, recovery, its, communication, canberra, aftermath, 2003, media, 2007, case, role, disasters

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A case study of the Canberra 'firestorm' and its aftermath 2003-2007

Susan Nicholls, Jolyon Sykes, and Peter Camilleri

ABSTRACT: *The enormous tragedy of bushfires with significant loss of life, destruction of property, and differential recovery resulting in community division—that is, 'cleavage planes'—has become an all too common feature of the Australian experience. Research on the communication aspects of emergencies has tended to focus on preparedness and response with little in-depth analysis of the role of the media and communication strategies relating to the recovery process. In this paper, focusing on the Canberra 'firestorm' of 2003 and the aftermath recovery process, we report on a study seeking survivors' views on the functions of communication in the recovery process. The key points were that the media played a significant role in affecting the recovering community—both positively and negatively—in their recovery, that multiple sources of information were needed, that individuals experiencing post-disaster stress absorb information differently, and that the timeliness of the information to individuals was important. A very powerful message was that political and legal issues arising from the aftermath of the fire greatly affected people's recovery. The research demonstrates that it is important for the media to acquire a degree of sensitivity regarding the effect its reporting has on a seriously damaged community and provide an accurate portrayal without sensationalism. It also suggests that communities seek agency in their own recovery and that government involvement can assist or hinder this process.*

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Introduction

Media images of fires burning, houses burnt to the ground, charred landscapes, and a rising death toll have been seared into the psyche of many Australians as the annual bushfire season commences. The 2009 Victorian bushfires were the latest in a long line of natural disasters that have shaped this country. Their significance lay in the scale of the disaster, the horrific

death toll, and the circumstances around how 173 people died (http://www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Commission-Reports).

The role of the media is highlighted in natural disasters, in particular the preparedness, mitigation, and response processes. The media frames a disaster and can either promulgate erroneous beliefs about disaster behaviour or provide a framework for understanding the process of recovery (Rattien, 1990; Tierney, Bevc, & Kuligoski, 2006). Research on the media has tended to focus on the disaster response and how the media has framed, shaped, and set the policy agenda (Barnes et al., 2008). Disaster management research has highlighted the importance of communication strategies by government authorities (Quarantelli, 1996; Emergency Management Australia, 2004; Glenny & Nicholls, 2005). While the media are significant players in all aspects of disaster management, authorities have a range of other communication channels available. The aftermath of natural disasters involves the development of significant communication strategies to assist both individuals and communities to recover.

The Canberra Bushfires on 18 January, 2003, officially referred to as a 'firestorm' (Australian Capital Territory Coroner's Report of 2006), provides significant relevance to current debates on the media, communication strategies, and the fast-moving public policy environment on bushfire management. In this paper, we explore the role of the media and communication strategies put in place that affected the community's recovery from this disaster. 'Black Saturday' (as the 2009 Bushfires in Victoria are referred to) highlighted the growing importance of the role of media coverage of the bushfires and the subsequent Royal Commission's recommendations on advice to communities concerning the 'stay or go' policy.

In examining media coverage of both the Canberra disaster and recovery, we needed to understand the Government's communication effort and the separate role played by the media in community recovery. We explored what kinds of media coverage people found helpful during the recovery, and what material the mass media should either avoid or be sensitive in covering. To do that, we provide some background as, for most readers, the Canberra 'firestorm' is a dim memory more than seven years on. However, for many in the ACT, images of bushfires still resonate.

Background: 2003 Canberra Bushfires

For Canberra residents, 18 January 2003 is the day the 'fires ripped through Canberra and the surrounding region ... changed us and our city forever' (Foster, 2005). Officially described as a 'firestorm', a 10-15 kilometre fire front hit the western part of the Australian Capital Territory and, within hours, four people died, three people were treated for serious burns and transferred to Royal North Shore Hospital Sydney, 49 people were admitted to Canberra hospitals, and 440 people received outpatient care. Four hundred and eighty-eight houses were destroyed in both urban and rural ACT. Nearly 160,000 hectares were burnt, including over 16,000 hectares of plantation forests and 31,000 hectares of rural leases. More than 5,000 people were evacuated to emergency centres and many more fled to safety with family and friends. A state of emergency existed from the onset of the firestorm until it was lifted on 28 January 2003. Over 50,000 residents lost their utility services (electricity, gas, and water) during the early post-fire stage. One thousand six hundred households experienced some damage due to the fires and sought assistance from government services. The total financial cost of the fires was estimated to be $350 million (ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, 2003).

Method

The research, which also investigated a number of issues connected to community recovery in addition to media and communication, consisted of a survey of 1600 households that had registered with the ACT Government, followed by in-depth interviews with a sample of the respondents. Five hundred questionnaires were returned and 40 people interviewed. Of the 126 questionnaire items, 22 were specifically on the media and communication. This paper will report only on this part of the research (Camilleri et al., 2010).

A bushfire-affected audience and the cleavage plane concept

In order to make an approximate comparison between the media usage of this audience and that of an average one, we compared the results with those of the Australian Social Attitudes Survey (Denemark, 2005, p. 223). A number of differences in methodology between the two surveys make a direct comparison difficult. However, a strong possibility exists that a disaster-affected audience is significantly more reliant on newspapers, radio, and the Internet than a general Australian audience. It relies less on ABC TV for this type of information and significantly less on commercial television. The comparison also indicates that talkback radio may be more significant for a disaster-

affected audience. Because of the different methodologies, we cannot quantify these differences, but this result indicates a need for further research.

During recovery, the different experiences of people within the affected community can give rise to what Rob Gordon, the Victorian psychologist at Emergency Management Australia, describes as 'cleavage planes' (EMA, 2004; Gordon, 2004). Cleavage planes occur where profound bonding among fellow survivors, the norm immediately after a disaster, is affected by differentials such as:

- those who lost houses versus those who lost other possessions
- those who were insured versus those who were not
- those eligible for assistance versus those who were not
- those who remained during the emergency versus those who did not
- those who intended to rebuild versus those who did not.

These differentials create stresses severe enough to break and damage relationships within the affected community. The concept of cleavage planes will be used in analysing the examples of media coverage that follow.

The Case Study

Media usage for recovery-related information

The first question in the Media and Communication section of the survey asked respondents which media they relied on for information since the bushfire. This was designed to go beyond the standard methodology used for ratings surveys, which generally seeks a snapshot of an audience's media usage at a particular time. There are two significant differences. Firstly, the question assumed an active audience, one that is deliberately seeking information, rather than one that uses the media as entertainment or as background for other activities. It also asked respondents to make a judgement of usage over a period of time.

Respondents were asked to assess their reliance on the following scale:

- never used
- hardly ever used
- used regularly
- used heavily.

During analysis, the first two and the last two items were combined in order to minimise differences resulting from subjective factors. Those who did not respond to this question were included in the percentage analysis in order to judge the media usage of this audience under these circumstances in a realistic manner. This result contains a number of surprises. While we expected the local newspaper, *The Canberra Times,* to be the dominant form of media used (72%), its relatively narrow margin over the two ABC networks, television (65%) and radio (55%), will be of interest to an emergency manager anxious to place information before this audience. Free local newspapers rank next, at 43%, and commercial free-to-air television at 39%.

Our results confirm the rising importance of the World Wide Web, and the Internet, which was used regularly or heavily by 31% of this audience. Brochures or flyers were a significant source of information for 25%, while direct telephone enquiries were used by 22%. Usage of special interest publications and local commercial radio were both 19%, less than might be expected, while public notice boards were used by 11%. Newspapers, flyers, and mailbox letters/flyers from the Recovery Centre by mail were the most influential sources of information. This reminds us of their importance. Local community radio, which is important to multi-cultural and minority groups, was used by 7% of this audience.

The total (Used Regularly and Used Heavily) response was 41.6%, consistent with an audience that is not relying on a single source but is monitoring a number of preferred sources. This clearly has implications for the recovery process: multiple communication channels are used by those affected in any disaster.

Respondents to this survey were people who had survived a major disaster and had become a different audience from the norm. This audience was more active and less passive, seeking information and discriminating between media sources of information rather than accepting what was offered.

> *I haven't turned (ABC local radio) off since that day. I used to listen to [commercial radio] but haven't since.*
>
> *Very aware of high fire danger periods and the weather in summer. Don't like being away from the house, especially on hot windy days in summer. On these types of days I stay 'glued' to the ABC Radio (666) for weather reports etc.*

On the other hand, the effect of the bushfire on some respondents had been the opposite. Instead of becoming more active, they had disengaged from the media, at least to some extent. For these people, media coverage was an unwanted reminder:

> *To be frank, I chose NOT to listen, read or watch any media coverage. It was all distressing and I wanted to actively manage my emotional state to keep equilibrium.*
>
> *It was a bit scary seeing it on TV. TV shows were from the outside looking in. I was on the inside looking out.*

This implies that many 'survivors' of disasters are 'turned off' the media and no longer listening to messages.

Types of media content that were helpful

Television or radio features	70.2%
Interviews with other residents or experts	60%
Media comment and editorials	45%
Letters to the editor	41%
Stories in magazines	36.7%
Interviews with government ministers or officials	33.7%
Talkback radio	31.8%

Table 1. The types of stories that survivors found most helpful

TV and radio features, consisting of research, finding and interviewing sources including residents, officials and residents, present complex and often conflicting opinions and information in a comprehensible way (Conley & Lamble, 2006, p. 315). Not surprisingly, features make more sense of a disaster than the elements that go into them: anecdotes, interviews, and comment. The interesting finding here is that features in broadcast media seem to be more helpful than similar material in the print media.

Types of media content that were unhelpful

Interviews with government ministers or officials	35.5%
Letters to the editor	17.5%
Interviews with other experts	15.2%
Interviews with other residents	14.6%
Media comment and editorials	13.3%
Stories in magazines	12.9%

Talkback radio	11.9%
TV or radio features	8.4%
Internet blogs	5.1%
Chat rooms	2.9%

Table 2. Content that was unhelpful in recovery

A slightly different picture emerges from what victims or survivors found most unhelpful. Interviews with government ministers or officials in any media was the only type of story that more people found unhelpful than helpful. They rated these more than twice as unhelpful as letters to the editor. Other types of stories rated in descending order: other experts in any media, interviews with other residents in any media, media comment and editorials, stories in magazines, and talkback radio.

According to the EMA (2004), elected representatives (politicians) have a duty to play an important part in assisting the recovery of the community. What was difficult to judge is how much the controversy over the Coroner's Inquiry had affected respondents' views of politicians' roles in providing quality information during the early stages of the recovery process. It should be noted that some of the respondents felt that politicians' contributions were helpful at the time. The Coroner's Inquiry was subjected to a Supreme Court appeal by the ACT Government during the course of the inquiry. This disturbed the inquiry as it had to shut down until the Supreme Court brought down its ruling for the inquiry to continue. This provoked considerable anger among many of the victim groups.

In order to analyse what this audience regarded as helpful and unhelpful within the above typology, we turn to the final two questions in the media section. These asked for respondents to nominate individual instances of mass media coverage that they remember as 'particularly helpful' and 'offensive and unnecessarily distressing'.

It seems that many respondents were able to remember instances of helpful and unhelpful coverage even if they were unable to identify them unambiguously. There were several blanket responses, such as:

> *Coverage by local ABC Radio and TV has been excellent, as has (named journalist's) reporting in the Canberra Times. Feature stories in interstate newspapers are often more informative than the local media.*

The media's ability to place other people's stories in the public domain was appreciated by many respondents as being a helpful way of validating their own experiences.

> *Stories of those who see 'moving on' in whatever way – dealing with their trauma, recovering, rebuilding etc. All those examples of how crises bring out the best in people: ordinary people doing extraordinary things.*
>
> *Publicity about other people's experiences helped us take a more positive view of our own situation. Information about assistance available was valuable.*

The value of this kind of shared experience was confirmed by some interviewees:

> *A couple of channels put footage together and they showed it at the National Museum 3 or 4 months after the fire. … It was very traumatic but ultimately we found that very very helpful. No one moved for 3-4 minutes afterwards. Later we reflected on it—how important it was to see how big the thing was.*

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One interviewee, however, felt that the media could have done more:

> *It could have played a really useful role in educating the broader community about where the bushfire affected community was likely to be up to, and to help people understand what was normal in their recovery process, including information from people who know about these things'. This interviewee felt that*

the media let the community down. Another interviewee stated that the media created a false expectation of recovery.

Some survey respondents found that stories analysing the cause of the bushfire and how it resulted in a large-scale disaster helpful; to others, it was a continuing irritation. This reflects one of the main findings of this investigation: that no one factor emerges as helping or hindering every affected individual. One factor might help some and hinder others. Another theme was the media's concentration on urban issues, ignoring rural ones.

The Canberra Times

Overall, the main local daily newspaper, *The Canberra Times,* identified as the media outlet most relied upon, was singled out for praise by over 30 respondents to the survey and criticised by very few. Typical comments were:

> *The Canberra Times has been quite supportive. …the fact they kept the same reporter working on the bushfire story has been very helpful. They've got a reporter who knows the issues, knows the background. I think that's been very important.*
>
> *The Canberra Times initial coverage and information for people affected by the fires was very useful. Some letters to the editor (in papers) were useful, if constructive but others, I found whingey and unproductive.*

The Canberra Times published around 250 bushfire-related stories during the recovery period in 2003, beginning with the announcement of the opening of the Recovery Centre on Friday 24 January. A detailed analysis was beyond the scope of this study.

The ABC's Stateline program

ABC TV broadcast a series of short features in its regular Friday *Stateline* program in 2003. They were described as helpful by eleven respondents and were criticised by none. In one example, broadcast on 21 February, Robert de Castella talked about the loss of his Chapman home in the Canberra bushfires. Recently appointed to the Recovery Taskforce, he was careful not to exacerbate the cleavages between those who were deciding to rebuild and those who were selling their blocks, those who stayed to fight the bushfire and those who were absent, and those who lost their homes and those who did not:

I've always been of the view that you shouldn't make decisions emotionally and irrationally, so we'll take a little bit of time to decide what we'll do.

This is a blow there's no doubt about it and it takes a little while to recover… you go down on your hands and knees for a little while but you get back up and you keep on going. I've got friends who've been in car accidents who are in wheelchairs for the rest of their lives, we've got our health. Luckily we weren't here so we don't have any of the emotional scarring and issues that a lot of the residents who fought the fires and kept their houses still have to go through and come to terms with and thank heavens we weren't one of the very few fortunately, the very few that lost their lives - So I think we've got a lot to be very thankful for. (ABC, 2003)

The ABC's Catalyst program

Six weeks after the fire, ABC TV, in its program *Catalyst,* broadcast a documentary report on why the bushfire penetrated so far into the suburbs. This feature was based on an investigation by the CSIRO, interspersed with interviews from survivors. The report served as an example of media coverage aimed at representing the disaster to the wider community and helping those affected to gain some understanding of what had happened.

The program advocated thorough preparation and staying to fight. While the story was well-researched and factual, it (probably inadvertently) presented one side of a potential cleavage with little balance from the other. Many people left when their situation became impossible, or because their age or infirmity limited their firefighting capacity. Many people were later prevented from entering or re-entering their suburb by the emergency services. Those who stayed and saved their homes regarded this story as helpful, but it could have hindered, to some extent, the recovery of those who did not.

The following responses to the question relating to 'offensive and unnecessarily distressing' items in the media illustrate this point:

I saw [our home] burning down in a TV show and the expert saying it would not have happened if anyone had been at home with a hose. This was very distressing.

The debate that perhaps staying with your home was best in order to save it as we didn't have any [water] and it was very dangerous. This was unsettling and distressing.

Others singled the program out for praise, illustrating the nature of the cleavage:

> *Catalyst was the only program (and one on ACT ABC TV) which really helped in understanding what had happened, but were lazy on the 'why'. I found that an understanding of what had happened (climate, green matter) was helpful towards recovery.*

These responses show that Gordon's (2004) cleavage planes concept is useful in analysing what types of media stories help recovery and what types hinder. Good journalism in this context is related to understanding the concept of cleavage planes, reporting accurately from a survivor's point of view, with a minimum of sensationalism, unfounded speculation, or gratuitous advice.

Communication in recovery is not merely information-giving. It involves:

- giving information and receiving feedback on that information;
- allowing information, policies, and resources to be modified and improved.

Emergency Management Australia's (EMA) *Manual No. 10: Recovery*, contains the following instructions for delivering information to communities recovering after disaster:

> *The community recovery information services provided to affected people aim to lower anxiety levels and to restore a sense of predictability through accurate, credible information that services are available to assist and hasten recovery as well as the means of accessing those services. … The information should be available as soon as possible and provided and repeated through a range of information means. (EMA, 2004, p. 73)*

The manual then lists the different media channels that should be used to distribute information: leaflets, posters, newsletters, information centres, recovery centres, community agencies, radio, newspapers, television, outreach visits, and public meetings (note that new media such as e-mail, websites, mobile telephone text messaging etc., are not mentioned). However, the manual does not elaborate on what kind of information should be given, nor the best methods of using these

channels. EMA noted that access to information for people affected by the disaster is a major issue, and therefore must be made available to the whole of the affected area; non-English speaking people; isolated people and communities; and secondary victims (EMA 2004 , p. 73).

Community Update (CU)

The ACT Government established a Recovery Centre that was a 'one-stop shop' for services to those affected by the fires. As part of its activities, the Centre provided information services, including a regular newsletter called *Community Update.* The research team focused specifically on the newsletter and sought to find out how those affected received it, what they thought of the content, and what could have been improved.

Most people received copies of *CU* through letter-box drops (99.8% n=431). People also obtained copies through the Recovery Centre (14.4%), local shop (7.2%), and via the Internet (4.6%). Most respondents 89.8% (n=449) said they received the newsletter regularly. More than half the respondents said they kept *CU* as a reference (n=453), and of those who remembered seeing articles in *CU*, 94.9% (n=398) said articles overall in *CU* were either helpful or very helpful.

- 84.4% and 83.7% (n=430) said news about upcoming events, and information about support and grants schemes, respectively, were helpful or very helpful.
- 68.1% said information on finance and insurance was either helpful or very helpful (n=420).
- 67.5% said information on demolition and rebuilding was either helpful or very helpful, and
- 67.3% said stories from other affected families were either helpful or very helpful.
- articles about public health issues, counselling services, gardening, bush regeneration, and *Lucky the Koala* were generally well received, with 'helpful' or 'very helpful' responses ranging from 75.1% to 73.8%.
- messages from the Chief Minister, and other ACT spokespeople were regarded as unhelpful by 34.5%, and helpful by 39%, while 19% did not remember seeing such messages (n=426).

In the qualitative responses about what *CU* could have done better, most respondents liked the newsletter and did not find fault with it. Comments such as '*informative'*, '*excellent publication', 'kept all copies as part of my bushfire memories*' were common. The most frequent

criticisms related to timeliness, and what was seen as 'government cheeriness' with a corresponding lack of community input. One respondent commented: *'at times I felt the stories were attempting to be "too happy" for the time frame i.e., we were all recovering—at times it was out of sync with the larger bushfire community which was very irritating at times. You knew it was a government run newsletter not a community run one'.*

Respondents were divided on how long after the event the report should have been published; some felt earlier, some later. Comments were made that the issues covered neglected certain groups, or focused too heavily on particular interests. One respondent commented: '*Not focus on certain families more than others—found this upsetting at times when we were having so many hold-ups to progress'*. Some respondents said that CU included inaccurate information about discounts or building costs. Some respondents felt that CU neglected those who had not lost their houses but had suffered other kinds of losses. The overall view, however, was that *CU* was a well-used and useful resource, but one that could have benefited from more community input and less 'political' content.

Other sources of information

Other sources of information and communication were:

- the Canberra Connect call centre,
- the Bushfire Recovery website,
- advertisements in *The Canberra Times*,
- community service announcements on TV and radio.

These resources were not well-used and respondents did not consider them helpful. Notably, the recovery website was little used by respondents (71.6% n=479 did not use the website), although suggestions for improved communication often mentioned the value of a website.

Many respondents misunderstood questions about bushfire awareness. Respondents used these questions to criticise the lack of warnings before the fire. Television scored slightly higher than other media (54.6% n=469) as a source of helpful information about bushfire awareness advice over 2004 and 2005. However, in answer to the quantitative question, 'If you heard any community service announcements, for example bushfire awareness advice in summer 2003-4 and 2004-5, how would you rate them?', respondents added

spontaneous critical qualitative comments such as, '*Why should I trust govt announcements?*', and '*A bit late*'.

Questions about availability, timeliness, and clarity of information on recovery from the ACT Government elicited mixed responses.

- 68.1% of those who used the information provided indicated it was available or very available
- 49.7% said it was usually or always timely
- 73.4% indicated that the information was usually or always understandable
- 27.1% said the information was received too late to be useful.

In questions about the ACT Government's response to contact, the following information was elicited: 53.5% (n=465) of respondents said they did not make contact. Of those who did make contact, 57.4% said they either usually or always received a good response. 41% said they got either no response or a poor response. This is a signal criticism of government responsiveness to the recovering community's need for two-way communication.

What further information would have been of use to respondents?
The question 'was there any information about recovery that was not included in the information provided by the ACT Government?' called forth a large number of critical responses relating to the lack of information *before* the bushfire. Of those who answered the question, many stated that they required an explanation as to why and how the bushfire occurred in order to make sense of the event. However, the majority of answers indicated that respondents did not require further information.

Some respondents asked for more information on specific aspects still affecting them, relating to both short-term information they would have liked to have had immediately after the bushfire and longer-term information still required. Some requests were general and practical in nature, some very personal and specific. A few respondents were satisfied with the information that they had received.

Other comments on communication and media
The final question, asking if there was anything else respondents wanted to say about communication and media since the bushfire, brought forth a very wide range of responses. Many of these repeated earlier comments about pre-bushfire information and media, and

commented negatively on the Coronial Inquest process. However, one respondent expressed gratitude for the overall community response after the bushfire: *'Canberra (and OZ) community fantastic. That needs to be communicated. A big thanks from "victims"'*.

While some respondents were grateful for media community announcements about emergency warning procedures, others found the sound of the warning siren used in the broadcasts very stressful. Some found later 'burn-off' activity distressing, and there was a range of responses regarding bushfire and smoke warnings. For example *'I am pleased that the radio station always announces burn offs and reasons if there is smoke around';* to *'when the forests were being cleared and then "burnt" after the fire this caused a lot of pain with memories and fear. This should have been covered by a large media campaign well before the burning to warn people. It hit raw nerves*'.

Respondents also offered a number of suggestions about how to manage any future emergency and recovery process:

> *There needs to be a simple, clear and well advertised way of communicating with all residents in the event of an imminent emergency;*
>
> *a central spot where all the information could be found would be excellent;*
>
> *need more focus put on education and prevention;*
>
> *I would like the TV stations during their weather forecasts to inform viewers of the fire danger rating with pictures for the hard of hearing.*

Some respondents indicated that understanding brought about by information assisted in recovery, a point that was made frequently in relation to the Coronial Inquiry.

Others suggested that they were inundated with information and had had enough, or were tired of media focus on the bushfire. A large number of respondents said that delays to the Coronial Inquiry, and the lack of warning and/or conflicting information on the day of the bushfire, were continuing to affect their ability to recover.

Findings from this section of the survey show the great variety of responses from bushfire-affected people to their experience of the

aftermath of the bushfire and their journey of recovery. With regard to government communication, appreciation for the Recovery Centre, *Community Update,* and the efforts of recovery workers were evident. While broad indications can be seen, the findings do not warrant over-explicitness in recommendations regarding good, poor, useful, or unused communication activities since many responses were contradictory.

A number of respondents' testimonies were affected by their reaction to the lack of warning on the day of the bushfire and to delays in the subsequent Coronial Inquiry process. However, what does emerge from this section of the survey were themes of the respondents' desires for the following:

- consultation
- community input and government response to expressed needs
- trustworthy information to enable affected people to make their own decisions
- affected people being given responsibility for making decisions
- a wider base of accessible communication.

It should be noted that, in many cases, things that respondents asked for *were* provided. That this was not known by respondents, or not known until after their need had passed, indicates that better dissemination of information about available services and resources may be required in future. However, people do not notice information until it is salient to them. Timeliness of information provision needs to be addressed. More repetition of information, accompanied by an explanation about why it is repeated, would be useful. Trust and credibility issues were raised, suggesting that information and advice should be attributed to credible sources. Information or comment identified as coming from political sources was widely regarded as untrustworthy, propagandist, and unhelpful.

We have briefly mentioned the use of the Internet and social networking sites. Though it has been only seven years since the dramatic events of the Canberra 'firestorm', it is now evident that social networking sites will become more important in the future management of disasters and the recovery process. Sutton, Palen, and Shlovski, researching the 2007 *Southern California Wildfires,* noted the growing importance of social media. They reported that 'social media supports backchannel communication, allowing for wide-scale interaction between members of the public that has qualities of being collectively resourceful, self-

policing and generative of information that cannot be otherwise easily obtained' (2008, p. 7). In 2003 and the recovery period following, social media such as SMS messaging was in its infancy, and social networking tools such as *Twitter*, *YouTube,* and *Facebook* were non-existent. However, with the increasing use and sophistication of social media, this finding would probably be different were a similar disaster to occur today. Disaster management and recovery models need to become more aware of the significance of social media.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have outlined some of the functions of communication in recovery as it was conducted both in the media and by recovery agencies after the Canberra fires. The key points were:

- that messages were absorbed differently by individual community members
- timeliness was an issue that needs to be addressed
- individuals were not uniformly ready to receive messages
- use of multiple sources of messages was an important factor in communication
- political and legal issues surrounding the event also affected the recovery process.

Both media coverage and political statements on these carry a high risk of exacerbating cleavage planes within the affected community. The media was highly important and, for many respondents it played a significant role in the recovery process. We have argued that the idea of 'cleavage planes' is useful and that, to contribute to rather than impede recovery, the media has to provide an accurate portrayal without sensationalism. Finally, this paper suggests that further research into social media is needed to establish its uses in recovery communication.

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